Minor Differences

BY ADAM LEVY

UNLIKE THE MAJOR SCALE, which needs no qualifier (an *A* major scale is an *A* major scale is an *A* major scale), minor scales come in a variety of colors—natural minor (synonymous with the Aeolian mode), harmonic minor, and melodic minor being the most common. As each minor scale type has its own unique sound and musical applications, it's important to familiarize yourself with the subtle differences between them. (The better to improvise with, my dear.)

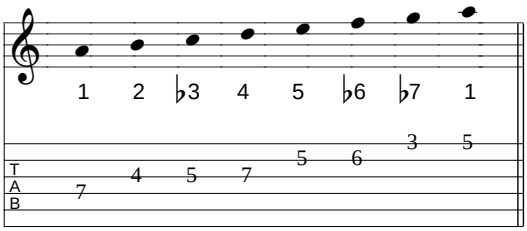
Family Resemblance. Natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor have much in common. In fact, the first five degrees of each scale formula are the same: 1, 2, ♭3, 4, 5. It's the two final notes of each scale—the 6 and 7—where they digress. The natural minor scale has ♭6 and ♭7; the harmonic minor scale has ♭6 and 7; the melodic minor scale has 6 and 7. (Remember, when discussing *any* scale formula, we always use the major scale as our reference point. For example, in the *A* natural minor scale we consider the 6th degree, *F*, a "♭6" because in an *A* major scale the 6 is *F*♯.)

To get these three scales under your fingers and in your ears, check out **Examples 1a**, **1b**, and **1c.** Play each form ascending and descending. Take your time—the point is to really hear the difference between the scales, not to flex your chops. Once you've memorized each fingering, experiment—go fishing for the melodic ideas swimming within the scale. (You may find it helpful to attach your own verbal description to each minor scale type, like, "Harmonic minor is the Middle Eastern-sounding minor scale, with the big gap between the ♭6 and 7" or "Natural minor is the folksy minor scale," or however it sounds to you.)

Let's Jam. Now that your ears and fingers are familiar with the scales, let's hear them in context, against appropriate chordal backgrounds. **Ex. 2**'s moody *Amadd9-Fmaj7♭5/A* vamp makes an excellent setting for exploring *A* natural minor *and A* harmonic minor sounds. Get your jam buddy to play the chords while you solo (and vice versa), or just

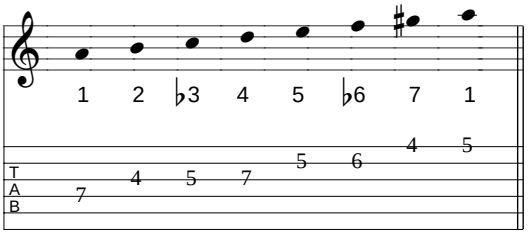
Ex. 1a

A Natural Minor



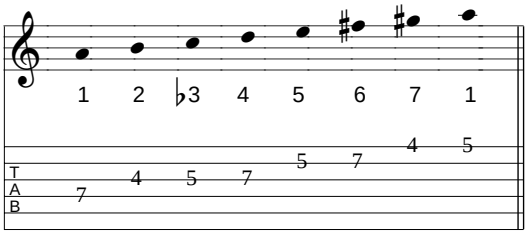
Ex. 1b

A Harmonic Minor

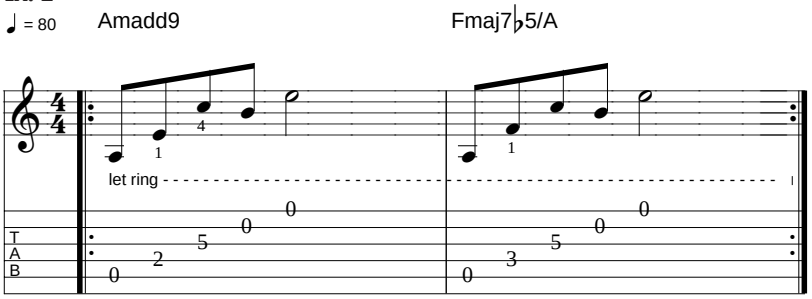


Ex. 1c

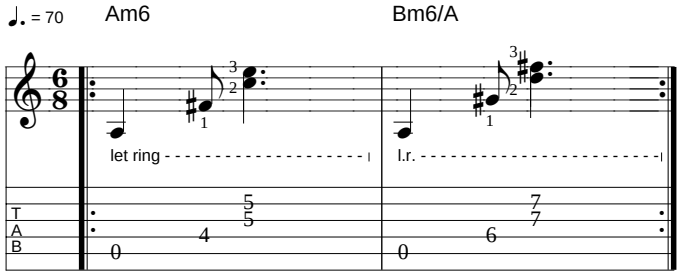
A Melodic Minor



Ex. 2

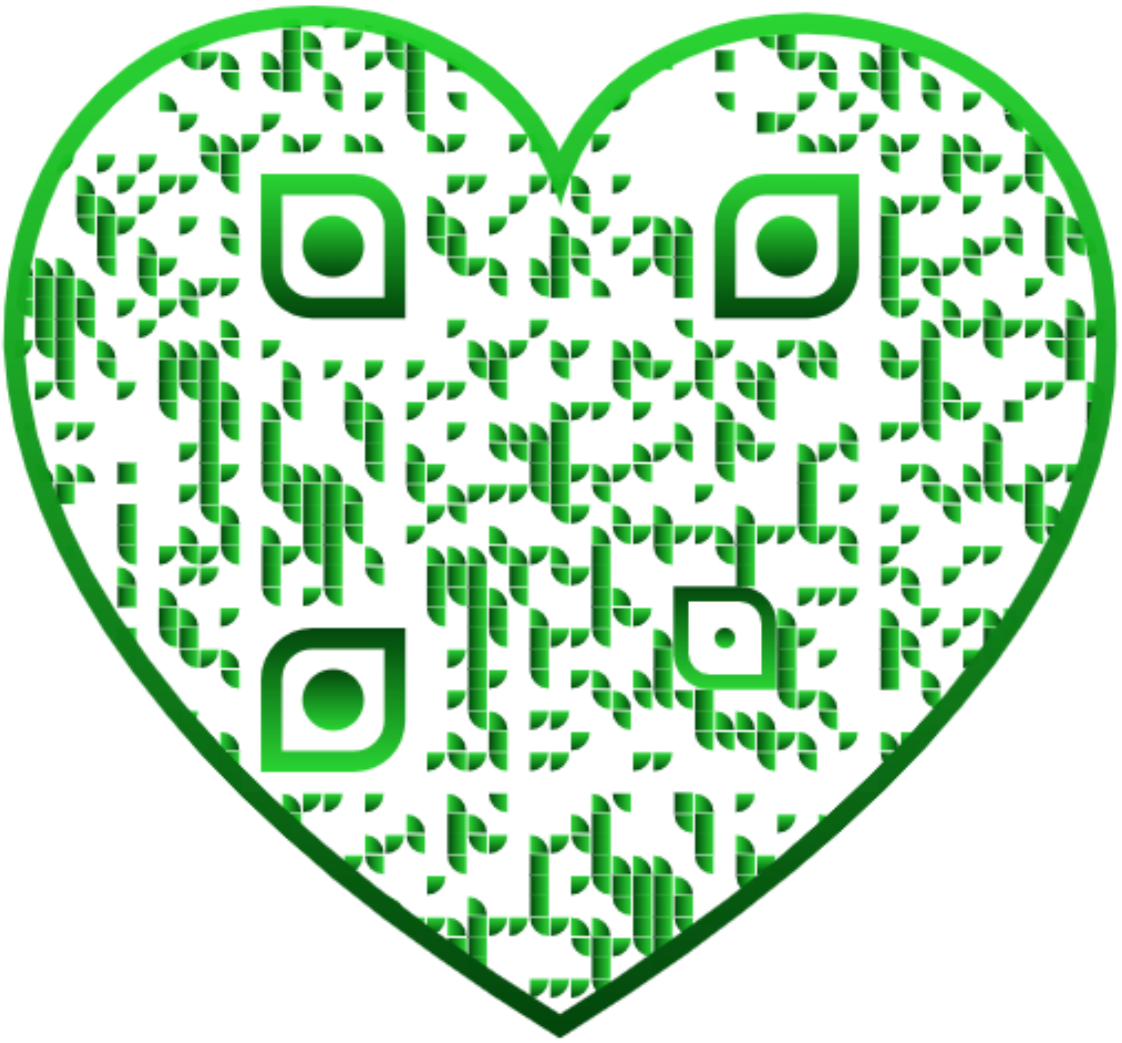


Ex. 3



MINOR SCALE FORMULAS

natural minor	1	2	♭3	4	5	♭6	♭7
harmonic minor	1	2	♭3	4	5	♭6	7
melodic minor	1	2	♭3	4	5	6	7



record yourself playing the vamp and then solo over the playback. Play an extended jam with harmonic minor or natural minor, or toggle back and forth between the two within a single solo outing.

Ex. 3's *Am6-Bm6/A* loop is perfect for stretching out with the *A* melodic minor scale. Follow the jamming recommendations given for the other minor scales and spend some quality time with this scale.

On the Horizon. In future Back Track columns, we'll be looking at melodic minor and harmonic minor scales in more detail—studying their modes (yes, the melodic minor and harmonic minor scales have their own modes!) and harmonies, and finding ways to put all this new info to work.

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